

# What if . . ?

Neville Morley

In 490 B.C., the armies of Darius crossed into mainland Greece, intent on punishing those cities which had incited the Greeks of Asia Minor to revolt against their Persian rulers. The Athenians marched bravely out to meet the invaders at Marathon, but were overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers; the Spartans, having delayed sending out reinforcements because of a religious festival, arrived too late for the battle and could do no more than conduct an orderly withdrawal back to the Peloponnese. Darius restored the exiled Athenian tyrant, Hippias, to the throne as his loyal client; with the execution or exile of a few prominent Athenians, the doomed experiment in 'democracy' was brought to its natural conclusion. 'This proved, if proof were needed', wrote Herodotus, the great historian of the Persian Empire, 'that even the unbridled anarchy of the mob must yield to royal command.'

Most historians are interested in what really happened in the past. 'Counterfactual' or 'virtual' history is concerned with what might have happened instead: if a battle had been lost rather than won, or if a key decision had gone one way rather than another, or if things had in some other way turned out differently. If the Athenians had lost at Marathon, would anyone now remember the idea of democracy, or think anything of Athenian culture? If Caesar had turned back from the Rubicon, would the Republic have survived after all, or would civil war merely have been delayed by a year or so? If Constantine had lost the battle of the Milvian Bridge, or had interpreted his vision differently, would Christianity ever have become a world religion rather than an eccentric minority sect?

The great attraction of counterfactual history is the thrill of wondering how different our own world might now be, if events had turned out differently. Few historians regard this as anything more than entertainment, a kind of holiday from 'proper history'. As a serious academic enterprise it seems intellectually dubious, since it depends so much on wild speculation, and relies so much on hindsight to identify critical points in history: no one at the time realised that Constantine's victory spelled the end of traditional Roman religion. Studying imaginary pasts, things that didn't happen, seems to tell us nothing of any importance about what really did happen. However, counterfactual history can make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past

In 312 A.D., as he camped outside Rome, the usurper Constantine received a vision of a divine figure who promised him victory the next morning. Emboldened by this, he marched forth under the banners of the Unconquered Sun — to the disgust of a number of Christians, who had tried to claim that his vision was really of Jesus — and seized control of the western half of the Empire. In return for this sign of the god's blessing, Constantine spent lavishly on temples and the priesthood, restoring the old Roman religion to its traditional place at the heart of classical civilisation. Having learnt the lessons of the previous century, he did not attempt to persecute the Christians, but tolerated their strange beliefs and practices; they soon fell to ferocious internal squabbles about the finer points of doctrine, and declined into irrelevance.

by highlighting the ways that historians develop ideas about the causes and consequences of events.

Any attempt at explaining an event in the past carries with it an implicit counterfactual: that is to say, if we declare that the cause of the Peloponnesian War was X, then we imply that, if X had been absent, the war would not have happened. Counterfactual history makes these sorts of assumptions explicit. By considering how likely it was that things might have happened differently, and using ancient evidence to speculate on the possible consequences, the counterfactual approach forces us to consider whether the suggested explanations are really sufficient to explain events, and whether the alleged turning-

In January 49 B.C., Julius Caesar and his army reached the Rubicon, the stream that marked the boundary between his province and Italy; to cross it would mark the final breach with the Republic. As the army camped for the night, some soldiers saw a female figure on the opposite bank, holding up her hand to bar the way. Word quickly spread through the camp that Italia herself had forbidden them to cross over from Gaul. Caesar pleaded that it was his duty to defend the rights of the tribunes in Rome, but his commanders were adamant that the men would not follow him; he therefore withdrew disconsolately to Gaul, while Pompey consolidated his position in Italy and gathered forces for a counterstrike. 'The die was cast', wrote Caesar. 'Rome lay at the mercy of the wolves.'

points in history are really as significant as all that. For example, it is commonly assumed that the battle of Marathon saved democracy and so gave Athenian culture the opportunity to flourish. We can see that Athenian victory was never certain, since they were heavily outnumbered and the Spartan reinforcements did not arrive in time. The deposed tyrant Hippias had been at the Persian court, and so it seems likely that he would have been restored as client ruler; supported by the Persians, he would have been more difficult to dislodge a second time. The question then becomes whether democracy was vital for the development of Athenian culture, or whether tragedy and philosophy might have emerged even if Athens was part of the Persian Empire. Similarly, we know that Constantine's victory brought about a tremendous change in the fortunes of the Church, but might Christianity have triumphed anyway? The counterfactual approach demands that we think carefully about the situation of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century, rather than focussing entirely on the fact that, as things actually turned out, they enjoyed the good fortune of Constantine's conversion.

Counterfactual history tends to focus on military history and on decisions made by prominent individuals; after all, it is easy to imagine how a battle might have gone the other way or the general might have changed his mind. However, it is also possible to make use of the counterfactual approach in looking at economic and social history. For example, it offers a way of considering the effects of epidemics, not just in killing off individuals — might Athens have won the Peloponnesian War if Pericles hadn't died in the plague? — but in devastating the population and so affecting agriculture as well as military strength: would the Roman Empire have been so vulnerable to its enemies in the third century A.D. if it had not been suffering the after-

effects of the Antonine Plague? Alternatively, we can consider the importance of slavery – would farming have been more or less efficient using free labour? – or technology. Ancient scientists did identify the basic principles of steam power, but never constructed a proper steam engine: it is illuminating both to imagine circumstances in which the Romans might have made this leap (emphasising the major impediments to technological development) and to consider whether steam power would actually have had the same dramatic impact on Roman society as it did in nineteenth-century England.

Some historians like counterfactual history because it emphasises the role of chance and individual choice, as opposed to vast impersonal social and economic forces, in shaping events. Things could so easily have been quite different: the present is the outcome of a series of accidents and spur-of-the-moment decisions. This is opposed to the sort of ‘teleological’ history that believes that the past was shaped by the Hand of God or the laws of economic development or the destiny of nations. Clearly the past was not wholly pre-determined, but we still need to ask, for any situation, how far things would actually have changed. Even if we can imagine a plausible situation in which Caesar decided not to cross the Rubicon in 49 B.C., the evidence suggests that civil war would have broken out eventually. Counterfactual history shows that the importance of that particular event has been over-stated, and directs our attention instead to the general state of the Roman Republic and the pressures operating on Pompey and Caesar, limiting their freedom of choice.

‘Had Cleopatra’s nose been shorter, the whole face of the world would have changed.’ So thought the seventeenth-century French writer Pascal. If Cleopatra had been less beautiful, and Mark Antony had not fallen for her, then he might not have quarrelled with Octavian: no battle of Actium. On the other hand, perhaps the quarrel was inevitable, given the rivalry between Caesar’s friend and Caesar’s nephew; but the result of the battle might have been different, if Antony had not alienated potential supporters by consorting with the Egyptian queen. But would Caesar Antonius have been a very different ruler from Caesar Augustus? At any rate Virgil would have written a rather different *Aeneid* – unless he had after all remained in Mantua to grow cabbages . . .

*Neville Morley is Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Bristol. He works on Roman economic history and on historical theory, including counterfactual history (see ‘Trajan’s Engines’ in Greece & Rome 47.2 [2000]).*